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Innovations in Co-ordinating Undergraduate Students' Oral Tutorial Presentations

Abstract

Individual oral tutorial presentations have been utilised in numerous undergraduate courses to develop and assess students' skills in organising and communicating ideas and information to a select audience. However, evidence from the literature, interviews with academics (n=5), and the author's own experiences have demonstrated that these presentations have been plagued with issues ranging from poor quality presentations to non-attendance on the part of students and boredom for both academics and undergraduates alike. This article highlights these issues, then details a variety of successful ways in which academics have innovated to improve the level of student engagement and facilitate a higher achievement of learning outcomes. Some of these innovations pertain to individual presentations, yet interview data gathered indicated a strong trend towards replacing these with small group and whole group exercises, models for which are also explicated in this article. These models have been drawn from the Social Sciences and Humanities and provide templates that may be adapted for use in a range of different contexts. The resultant improvements in co-ordinating undergraduate students' tutorial presentations may contribute towards a more satisfying experience for lecturers, tutors, and students, and improved learning outcomes.

Keywords

Oral presentations, tutorials, attendance, engagement, posters, conventions, group work, authentic learning

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

Excellence in teaching has become a particular focus of higher education in the twenty-first century, with an emphasis on lecturers conducting research into teaching, sharing their findings with their peers, and making explicit those practices that previously constituted tacit knowledge (Ramsden, 2003). Contiguous with this, universities have been under increasing pressure to ensure that the skills with which their graduates emerge are readily transferrable to the workplace and promote lifelong learning (Boud, 2000). Within Australian universities, this has translated into an emphasis on articulating generic graduate attributes and translating these into course and unit outcomes that are constructively aligned with tasks evaluated within a paradigm of criterion-referenced assessment (Ramsden, 2003; Biggs, 2003).

In a climate where university students are increasingly seeing themselves as clients or customers there is increasing pressure on lecturers and tutors to ensure that the undergraduate experience motivates students and effectively facilitates their acquisition of graduate attributes (Race, 1999; Sander, Stevenson, King & Coates, 2000). Communication skills are valued as an essential graduate attribute. While written forms of assessment such as essays and unseen examination papers tend to dominate summative assessment, oral communication skills are critical across many disciplines (Joughin, 1998). Given the substantial numbers of students attending lectures, the development and assessment of oral communications skills is generally reserved for the smaller and more interactive tutorial setting (Ashwin, 2005). Within this environment, formative assessment tasks such as student-led small group discussions can be staged in the lead-up to students presenting to their entire tutorial group as part of the summative assessment regime.

Tutorial presentations have the potential to be enriching learning experiences for all involved. However, sometimes undergraduate students' oral presentations are seen at best as a waste of time and at worst as an excruciatingly boring experience for staff and students alike (Dawson, 1998). A lack of student engagement devalues the sense of belonging to a learning community and impacts negatively on the participants achieving the anticipated learning outcomes (Astin, 1997). Alternately, fostering a vibrant learning community creates numerous possibilities, including the acquisition of skills beyond, yet complementary to, those envisaged in the formal curriculum (Knight, 2002). There is therefore a need to ensure that undergraduates' oral tutorial presentations are co-ordinated in a way that delivers a meaningful and engaging experience for all involved. This is

particularly important given the crucial role that assessment tasks play in influencing learning (Entwistle, 2000; Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 2001).

Methodology

This article reports the findings from a qualitative study designed to work towards ascertaining what might constitute best practice in co-ordinating and assessing undergraduate students' oral tutorial presentations in Australian universities. Adopting a qualitative approach was predicated on the basis that it was best suited to providing a level of intricate detail that otherwise may not have been obtainable through utilising quantitative data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It is also an approach that is well suited to investigating phenomena associated with a naturalistic setting such as the tutorial room (Weimer, 2006). A triangulated research methodology was adopted, comprising a literature review, face-to-face interviews with academics (n=5), and the author's reflections on her own practice (supported by material drawn from student evaluations of teaching and learning [SETL] forms). The research data has been integrated into two sections, the first of which canvasses the main challenges posed by tutorial presentations while the second section details a number of innovative approaches that might usefully be adopted to circumvent or at least minimise these issues.

My interest in this research project was sparked by an innovation I implemented within tutorial settings in relation to the co-ordination of undergraduate students' oral tutorial presentations. This is described and analysed with reference to a model delineated by Ashcroft and Foreman-Peck (1994). Their emphasis is on reflective practice, with eight systematic steps being set out through which higher education practitioners may devise, develop, implement, and reflect on an innovation in the learning and teaching setting. Their method, in its earliest stages, is inductive as it requires an initial period of enquiry in order to determine what the practitioner's focus ought to be, and then becomes empirical as processes of intervention, observation, reflection, and refinement are followed (Ashcroft & Foreman-Peck, 1994). Triangulating my literature review and interview data with material based on my own practice makes transparent some of the assumptions underlying my analysis.

The literature review comprised a survey of pertinent Australian and international journal articles, book chapters, and monographs. Given that much of the focus in the existing literature deals with issues pertaining to assessment practices, I chose to focus on the co-ordination of tutorial presentations as a step towards addressing a perceived gap in the literature. My reading practice was informed by Brockbank and McGill's (1998) adaptation of Donald Schön's 'reflection-on-action' model

which translated into my engaging with the literature with the aim of critically reflecting on the 'content, process, and practice' of lecturers, tutors, and students in relation to oral tutorial presentations. Adopting this approach enabled me to identify key issues in the literature on tutorial presentations, and to note recurring themes that emerged out of the existing corpus. Foregrounding the literature review was advantageous as this, in turn, helped to inform the guided set of questions around which the face-to-face interviews with academic staff were later structured.

Invitations to participate in this research study were sent to fifteen academic staff across three universities situated in south-eastern Australia. These people were identified on the basis that they were currently involved in lecturing into a unit of study that had tutorial presentations listed as an assessable component. The invitation to participate elicited a 33% response rate, following which a series of face-to-face interviews was scheduled and conducted between April and June 2009. Interviewees were located across three universities and were drawn from two different areas of multi-disciplinary studies and two disciplines from the Social Sciences and Humanities. These academics ranged from Associate Lecturer to Professor, with a combined teaching experience of more than half a century. All were unit co-ordinators, and all were actively engaged in lecturing to, and tutoring, undergraduate students.

Face-to-face interviews with academics averaging one hour's duration were carried out in their offices or an alternative environment of their choice, with hand-written notes being my preferred method of data recording to minimise intrusiveness. Following Wengraf (2001), I adopted a semi-structured interview format. Twenty-one questions were prepared in advance and peer reviewed prior to ethics approval successfully being sought. The first three questions sought quantitative data such as the average number of undergraduate students participating in the unit under discussion, while the remaining questions were open-ended. This provided scope for the interviewees to provide detailed and nuanced accounts of their own experiences, yet also meant that some of my subsequent questions had to be carefully improvised. Adopting this approach was successful both in terms of generating relatively consistent sets of responses when the material was analysed thematically, yet also resulted in academics providing data that lay beyond the scope of my initial enquiry but that was nevertheless relevant to the thrust of my research initiative.

Challenges of Disengagement and Non-attendance

Paramount amongst the challenges facing academic staff involved in co-ordinating and assessing undergraduate students' oral tutorial presentations was entrenched student disengagement. Frank comments elicited from Australian academics during face-to-face interviews indicated that boredom was the principal characteristic attributable to the majority of individual oral presentations. In the words of one lecturer:

I think it's a very conflicted experience for them [students]. On the one hand, they're very closely identified with the person who is suffering, but on the other hand they are bored (Interviewee C, 30 April 2009).

Another lecturer provided an explanation of how 'sometimes the presentation stuns them [students] into silence because it is so boring... some of them are so terrible that it's hard not to switch off' (Interviewee B, 28 April 2009). This left the lecturer feeling compelled 'to try and get things started again' within the tutorial setting once the presentation had been completed. Observations from another lecturer confirmed these findings:

For me, it's [the oral presentation] an assessment process. For them [students] it's often an endurance test. You can see the ones sleeping in the back (Interviewee E, 29 June, 2009).

In a similar vein, a lecturer flagged the wide variation in the quality of presentations as an issue, explaining how:

The best presentations are very effective, stimulate great discussion, and are inspiring. The worst are a plodding step through the literature. The weak ones are wasting everyone's time (Interviewee A, 27 April 2009).

One of these lecturers has desisted from including tutorial presentations as a mode of assessment until honours level on the basis that 'it is difficult enough to get students to participate' (Interviewee A, 27 April 2009). Another interviewee no longer incorporates tutorial presentations as an assessment task into the first year program, reserving this mode of assessment for second and third year students and for those undertaking honours (Interviewee E, 29 June 2009). Yet another lecturer explicated a shift away from individual oral presentations, most

of which 'weren't very good', towards group presentations. These were considered to have the added advantage of encouraging students to police each other to ensure participation and, with the provision of more explicit instructions, better results were being achieved (Interviewee D, 6 May 2009).

Despite some lecturers moving away from utilising tutorial presentations as a form of assessment in first year programs, they all still considered the attainment of presentation skills to be essential. This is illustrated by a lecturer's observation in relation to graduates (who, from the course in question, generally seek work as consultants) that 'if someone has just paid you \$30,000 - \$50,000 they don't want to see a ham-fisted presentation, they want to see something professional' (Interviewee E, 29 June 2009).

Students, too, while often regarded as reluctant participants in tutorial presentations were considered to appreciate the value of having done so. In response to a question posed asking how, overall, the lecturer would rate students' experiences of presenting tutorial presentations one interviewee described how:

I guess it's a bit like going to the dentist? It's a necessary evil, they can see why they had to do it, they know it's a good thing to do. Did they enjoy doing it? Not usually' (Interviewee C, 30 April 2009).

This lecturer's perception of student responses to presenting tutorial presentations was corroborated by the data collected from the other interviewees. These responses are also supported in the literature, with Dawson (1998, p.45) noting perceived problems relating to the quality of papers as well as disengagement on the part of the student audience:

It is sometimes held that student papers are a waste of time: one person gives a badly organised and excruciatingly boring summary of a particular point of view, and nobody else says much about it as they hoped to pick up the essentials from the presentation without doing adequate preparation themselves.

Closely tied to disengagement were issues around student non-attendance. Declining student attendance at university has been flagged as an issue for centuries (Massingham & Herrington, 2006). In presenting a present-day case study on stimulating audience participation in student presentations (in an English context involving international students), Stead (2004) noted that attendance fell markedly as individual students stopped coming to tutorials after they had given their own presentation. Stead also found that students failed to take notes during other students' presentations and posed no questions to the student presenters.

This implies a direct correlation between disengagement and non-attendance, a supposition that is supported by Massingham and Herrington's (2006) finding that students need to perceive value in attending in order to be motivated to continue going to lectures and tutorials.

In the context of my own teaching practice, students are compelled to attend at least two-thirds of all their lectures and tutorials in order to maintain their eligibility to sit the end of semester written examination. This translates into most students attending the majority of their classes, with one or two exceptions. One of the most common issues I experienced relating to individual oral presentations was an increased likelihood that the student scheduled to present would be absent from the tutorial. Some students simply failed to appear, while others would email me (usually on the day of the tutorial) asking to reschedule their presentation. Another issue I experienced, in common with Stead, was that all too often students struggled to come up with any meaningful questions for the student presenter. As Dawson (1998) has implied, the extent to which the audience participates meaningfully is predicated on the quality of the student's presentation and the amount of background reading other students have engaged in prior to attending the tutorial.

Obviously, attendance alone does not necessarily result in improved performance. Instead, it is the quality of the learning experience that directly impacts on levels of student engagement and achievement (Massingham & Herrington, 2006). Within higher education, this translates into the need to provide a teaching and learning environment that incorporates experiences that correlate with real-world tasks such as problem solving, collaboration, action, and discussion. To be meaningful and engaging, and to promote deeper learning, it is essential that structured learning experiences are perceived as being authentic tasks (Massingham & Herrington, 2006).

To complicate matters, according to recent research by Joughin (2007), students conceptualise academic tasks such as oral assessment in a variety of different ways. According to his typology, the students he interviewed (n=15) conceptualised presentations either as facilitating the transmission of ideas, conveying an understanding of what they were studying, or adopting a position to be argued. Depending on how the students viewed the presentation, the audience was regarded as ranging from passive onlookers to active participants and assessors. Some students found oral presentations to be 'a particularly powerful form of learning and assessment' (Joughin, 2007, p. 333). While Joughin (2007, p. 334) conceded that his findings needed to be understood within the context of his particular study, he nevertheless advocated that 'it is possible that oral tasks

per se may have the potential to exert a strong influence on students' approaches to learning, the quality of their engagement in learning, and the quality of their learning outcomes'.

Successful Innovations in Co-ordinating Students' Tutorial Presentations

Innovating to overcome issues of non-engagement and boredom emerged as a powerful theme in the data generated through interviewing academics. Four of the interviewees reported trialling new approaches, with the fifth academic expressing a strong interest in doing so. The impetus to innovate arose, at least in part, as a response to perceived changes in the student cohort. As one interviewee put it, 'tutorials are changing because students are changing' (Interviewee D, 6 May 2009). This academic perceived present day students as being 'brighter and more skilled' than their counterparts from the 1990s, but as a corollary they are also 'more dependent on teachers', requiring more teacher-led activities to stimulate engagement in tutorial settings. Students were found to 'respond very enthusiastically' to 'fun ways' to engage in learning (Interviewee D, 6 May 2009).

A suite of different ways in which tutorial presentations may be co-ordinated emerged during the course of this research project. The innovative models explicated by the lecturers interviewed have all been trialled successfully within their own disciplines or multi-disciplinary fields. Outlines of these approaches are provided to be utilised and/or adapted for use within other practitioners' teaching and learning contexts. The potential usefulness of drawing on pedagogical approaches from beyond one's own disciplinary boundary has been well-established in the literature (Weimer, 2006). This concept has particular resonance in contemporary Australia where generic attributes extending across higher education institutions in their totality are embedded in the learning outcomes specific to any given learning context.

One of the most noticeable trends evident in the interview data gathered was a shift away from individual oral presentations towards intricately organised and co-ordinated small group and large group presentations. This has the added advantage of emulating workplace skills that include teamwork, planning, and the capacity to meet deadlines (Interviewee D, 6 May 2009; Biggs, 2003, p.187). A lecturer who lectures to approximately 160 students in a unit of study offered at second and third year level co-ordinates around 15-16 tutorials with 200 level and 300 level students being catered for discretely. Weekly meetings are held with the various tutors to provide mentoring and to plan tutorial strategies. In the third week of semester, students are provided with written information about the

required tutorial presentation which takes the form of a mid-semester convention involving everyone involved in the unit. The rationale for staging the convention is also provided, which includes the acquisition of workplace skills already mentioned, as well as pedagogical benefits such as peer learning. The specific learning objectives in terms of the acquisition and consolidation of specific disciplinary skills and knowledge are also detailed in writing. Marking criteria are made available to students to ensure that the assessment process is explicit and transparent (Interviewee D, 6 May 2009).

The convention is based around a specific set of circumstances with the scenario being provided to the students in a hand out. Each tutorial group becomes a constituency for the purpose of this exercise. In the fifth week of semester, each constituency (tutorial group) is expected to participate in online discussions in order to seek alliances, express their opinions, and to circulate their draft manifestos and statements of intent. Following these negotiations, the groups must finalise their manifestos in which they set out the key issues as they see them and outline their chief objectives in relation to any potential settlement. When the convention is staged, all the different constituencies come together in a face-to-face situation and present their manifestos to the wider group. Visual materials may be incorporated into these presentations. In addition to the online negotiations, two further negotiation periods are held at the convention. The main aim during these negotiations is to make alliances and to enter into compromises that best fulfil and protect the constituency's main interests. The following week, a debriefing session takes place during each tutorial with a focus on the advantages and disadvantages of such conventions as a means towards achieving the desired end. This assessment task concludes with the submission of a short reflective essay from each student a week after the debriefing session for which a discrete mark is allocated (Interviewee D, 6 May 2009).

The lecturer who stages these conventions likened their role to that of a 'puppet master'. As Unit Co-ordinator, they set the scenario, outline the problem, and allocate the roles. However, the task is highly interactive and a strong sense of responsibility towards their peers has been observed to develop among the student participants. Such is the level of responsibility and engagement that almost the entirety of those students with inevitable subject clashes privilege the convention over their other classes. The activities leading up to, including, and following the convention are based on a 'peer focus with a strong teacher presence', with 'incredibly clear criteria' being a prerequisite for success (Interviewee D, 6 May 2009).

Role play on a smaller scale involving group work within the tutorial setting is a popular way of engaging students in their learning with another of the interviewees. As in the model explicated above, the lecturer carefully manages and controls the situation. Students within the tutorial group are allocated specific roles. Sometimes the group may be split in half, with each portion representing a particular position. On other occasions, a scenario may develop that lends itself more towards the allocation of some individual roles. The role play is based on the week's lecture and associated tutorial reading material, with the student actors being asked questions pertaining to their assumed role. The aim is to have students respond as they think those they are representing might have responded, and to be able to rationalise their response. To reduce pressure on the individual performers, the wider group may also comment on what sort of response or responses may have been anticipated, and why. Providing plenty of opportunities for role playing has, according to the lecturer concerned, been helpful in encouraging the more reserved students within tutorial groups to participate. Performances during role plays feed into an overall mark for tutorial participation and attendance allocated at the end of semester (Interviewee A, 27 April 2009). Through the use of role play, students are encouraged to develop empathy, which contributes towards attaining graduate attributes of social responsibility and being able to take a global perspective. At the same time, the development of communication and problem-solving skills as well as discipline specific skills and knowledge is facilitated.

The usefulness of role playing in terms of encouraging student participation, and in particular as a way of eliciting responses from more reserved students, has also been noted by Levy (1997). He noticed that students ended up grappling with quite sophisticated issues during role plays, and considered that this mode of learning facilitated students' identifying more readily with various situations outside of their own lived experience. At the same time, though, some of the more shy students struggled with participating in this type of learning activity (Levy, 1997, p. 17).

Despite a noticeable trend towards group work, alternate ways of staging individual oral presentations are being utilised successfully by some lecturers as demonstrated in the final two models elaborated in this article. Sometimes relatively small innovations can have a large impact in terms of their effectiveness in generating student engagement. To generate discussion within the tutorial setting, one lecturer described how in a different teaching context they had collated a range of pertinent articles each week and then distributed these in sealed envelopes. Students received different articles with no-one being quite sure what had been handed to the other participants. This generated an air of mystery

and helped to excite the levels of curiosity that are a prerequisite of scholarly enquiry and learning. Because not everybody received the same material, the onus was on each individual to prepare thoroughly to play their role in the following tutorial. Peer pressure helped to ensure that each person played their part. The lecturer concerned observed that this approach added considerably to their workload. Yet it had worked so successfully that they considered it to be well worth introducing within their current teaching context. The increased levels of student engagement and attainment would potentially outweigh the extra effort involved (Interviewee A, 27 April 2009).

When considering how best to co-ordinate student presentations in a second and third year level course in 2005, I planned to take a new approach as having one or two students present each week throughout the semester had not worked particularly well during my first year of tutoring in 2004. Based on my contemporaneous experience as a postgraduate candidate, I decided to model the undergraduate tutorial presentation on a real-world experience: the academic conference. After consulting with a mentor, I planned to set aside two consecutive weeks following mid-semester break for a seminar. Students were given a 'call for papers' to which they were required to respond. Ten thematic areas were identified, from within which students could nominate their own topic. Instructions were provided as to the required length of the paper, and on how to prepare the required abstract. The students all responded to the call for papers, submitting abstracts on a wide range of pertinent topics following which a program was prepared and circulated to the students.

On the days on which the seminar was held, the Unit Co-ordinator joined us to hear the students' papers. The quality of the students' presentations was noticeably higher than the norm for the course. Many of the students used visual aids such as PowerPoint presentations and had clearly put a considerable amount of time and effort into preparing their papers. Most had also carried out research that went well beyond the minimum requirement of engaging with the set readings for the course. Being involved as presenters as well as forming part of the audience boosted student participation. The questions posed to their peers were more complex and insightful than on former occasions, and the responses were generally well thought through.

A discrete mark comprising 10% of their overall grade was awarded to each student in relation to their tutorial presentation. Anecdotal evidence suggested that the students had found this new format engaging, with one student writing on their SETL form that 'I thought it was a really good idea to have the seminar instead of a speech each week'. The same approach has been used successfully

with subsequent cohorts in the same course in 2006 and 2008, with some negotiations being necessary when more than one student nominated the same topic.

Conclusion

The main implication arising out of this study for teaching academics is that changing circumstances are rendering it desirable to reflect on the practice of co-ordinating undergraduate students' oral presentations with a view to adopting more innovative approaches. Through innovating, benefits may flow in terms of facilitating increased levels of student engagement which may, in turn, result in higher attendance levels. These factors can increase the likelihood of students achieving stipulated (and perhaps unintended) learning outcomes. Developing new approaches to staging oral presentations may also deliver more satisfying learning experiences for teaching staff and students alike.

The micro-level issues of student boredom, disengagement, and non-attendance identified in the literature and confirmed by those interviewed during this study have arisen within the macro-level context of a higher education sector that has seen significant changes in its student cohort over the past decade. The gates of universities have been opened to a wider range of people. Student expectations are changing, as are employer expectations in relation to the attributes acquired by university graduates. In response to internal and external pressures, teaching academics have come under increasing pressure to provide innovative experiences that will engage students. Notably, within the relatively small sample ($n = 5$) that participated in interviews for this research project, this has resulted in a marked shift away from facilitating individual oral tutorial presentations towards having students engage in group work with real world relevance.

A suite of models has been explicated in this paper that included staging a mid-semester convention with each tutorial group representing a specific constituency, small group role plays within the tutorial setting, tutorial discussions being stimulated through various different readings being distributed in sealed envelopes to the student recipients, and a mid-semester seminar being convened that followed the conventions of an academic conference.

The successful implementation of these models was predicated, at least in part, on the way in which the students' presentations were clustered together rather than being spread piecemeal throughout the semester. Also contributing to their success was the amount of scaffolding provided by lecturers and tutors, including detailed written background material and guidelines. Assessment criteria were

transparent, and elaborated in detail for the students. These criteria were provided to, and discussed with, students in the period leading up to the completion of the assessment task, with feedback being provided as soon as practicable afterwards.

One of the limitations evident in this research has been the relatively small sample size. Future research across a wider spectrum of the higher education sector in Australia would be useful in terms of confirming the extent to which the trends already noted might be confirmed. Potentially, working across a bigger sample size could also identify a wider variety of innovative models involving the co-ordination of students' oral tutorial presentations. In addition, the parameters of this study allowed for students' perspectives to be obtained only through seeking lecturers' views as to what these might be, drawing on anecdotal and SETL-supported evidence gathered from within my own teaching context, and through recourse to the scant literature available in this area. Had time and resources permitted, co-ordinating student focus groups would have added a potentially valuable additional data set to this study and would be useful in terms of further research in this area.

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